

# “Ideas about Human Possibilities”: Connecticut's PA 12-40 and Basic Writing in the Era of Neoliberalism

Patrick Sullivan

*ABSTRACT. In 2012, the State of Connecticut enacted Public Act 12-40, legislation that dramatically changed the way remedial education was theorized, designed, and delivered at community colleges and regional state universities in Connecticut. One of the most controversial features of this legislative movement was that it appeared to establish a “floor” for matriculation into open admissions institutions in Connecticut—thereby effectively abandoning students who scored below certain cut-off scores (at or below the 8th grade level on our standardized placement test). This essay reports on an ethnographic study conducted with individuals enrolled in one of the first classes designed for this cohort of students. This group of students provides professionals interested in questions related to access and higher education a unique opportunity to reflect on key questions for our profession and our nation, framed and embodied by very real people with unique life histories.*

*KEYWORDS:* social justice; adult education; Public Act 12-40; neoliberalism; basic writing

Stories have power. The power to change things. Thus history is not dead but alive, alive in the sense that our collective memory is what provides the starting points for understanding our contemporary world. Alive also in the sense that through these narratives we make accessible certain ideas about human possibilities and foreclose others.—Tony Holt, *Thinking Historically* (11)

## CONNECTICUT'S PA 12-40

In 2012, the State of Connecticut enacted landmark legislation that remade developmental education in our state. This new law, Public Act 12-40, dramatically changed the way remedial education was theorized, designed,

---

**Patrick Sullivan** teaches English at Manchester Community College in Manchester, Connecticut. Patrick is the author of *A New Writing Classroom: Listening, Motivation, and Habits of Mind* (Utah State University Press, 2014). With Christie Toth, he has also edited a book for Bedford/St. Martin's Professional Resources series, *Teaching Composition at the Two-Year College: Background Readings* (forthcoming, 2016).

### "Ideas about Human Possibilities"

and delivered at our community colleges and regional state universities (the University of Connecticut was not affected by this legislation). This legislation has drawn considerable national attention (Fain; Bailey, Hughes, and Jaggars), and it appears to have inspired similar legislation in Florida, Tennessee, and other states (Crandall and Soares; Hassel, Klausman, Giordano, O'Rourke, Roberts, Sullivan, and Toth; Turk, Nellum, and Soares). Impatient with very modest graduation rates among students who require remedial assistance in English and math, this legislation took the bold step of mandating an accelerated approach to developmental education, requiring all colleges in the system—twelve community colleges and four state universities—to offer a maximum of one semester of remedial work for any student requiring additional preparation for college. Furthermore, colleges were required to offer developmental students who were deemed “likely to succeed in college level work with supplemental support” the opportunity to enroll in a first-year composition class that provided embedded support, following the Peter Adams co-requisite model pioneered at the Community College of Baltimore County (Connecticut 1; Adams, Gearhart, Miller, and Roberts; Cho, Kopko, Jenkins, and Jaggars). As one might expect, there was considerable debate and controversy about this legislation, especially during the two years between the passage of the bill in 2012 and the required implementation date of fall 2014. During the two years given to college personnel before the required implementation date, English teachers at Connecticut’s community colleges and regional state universities set busily to work researching, designing, and piloting new remedial programs for students. We are now four years into this radical experiment of redesigning a state’s approach to developmental education by legislative mandate. Because of the complexity of this task and the many unanswered questions about pedagogy that have arisen during this process (some of which go back a long way in the history of basic writing), it appears that developmental curriculum in Connecticut will likely to be a work in progress for many years to come.

One of the most controversial features of this legislative movement was that it appeared to establish a “floor” for matriculation into open admissions institutions in Connecticut—thereby effectively abandoning students who scored below cut-off scores which were at or below the 8th grade level on our standardized placement test. (Community colleges in the state of Connecticut all use Accuplacer; regional state universities and the University of Connecticut use SAT or ACT scores. PA 12-40 mandates that all campuses must use “multiple measures” of assessment for placing students.) To many, this meant that we were, in effect, closing the open door

at Connecticut community colleges. As Chris Mullin reports in a recent brief for the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), “In policy conversations, especially those concerned with policies related to access and choice, there is a silent movement to redirect educational opportunity to ‘deserving’ students” (4). The initial idea when PA 12-40 was enacted was to remand these underprepared students to regional remediation centers and adult education programs off campus. After considerable debate and much public outcry, this position was softened, and colleges have now been allowed to develop regional “transitional strategies” for such students (Connecticut State). By state law, these strategies must be offered at little or no cost and cannot involve a student’s financial aid.

As English teachers in the state of Connecticut got to work responding to PA 12-40, meetings and brainstorming sessions were conducted statewide over the course of two years as we talked about how we might operationalize this new approach to teaching basic reading and writing. During this time, community colleges across the state implemented a variety of transitional strategies courses for our most underprepared students. Some of these strategies relied on existing adult education programs in local towns. Some relied on software programs that focus primarily on the development of reading skills, with the goal of helping students earn better scores on Accuplacer and thus help them test into an approved developmental class. Others, like the one I eventually offered, were more ambitious.

The English department at my home institution, Manchester Community College (MCC), in Manchester, Connecticut, set forth designing, testing, and implementing a new developmental curriculum over the course of two years (2012 - 2014), and as it turned out, I designed the transitional strategies curriculum for our college. This class eventually became English 9000, a kind of boot camp course designed to help students transition into one of our basic reading and writing classes. The development of this course required a great deal of research and discussion, and it occasioned considerable debate among my colleagues in the English department at MCC. I offered this class, English 9000, for the first time in the fall of 2014. It was offered free to students. Required textbooks were also purchased for students, funded by a state grant to our town’s adult education program. The class had an enrollment cap of 20 students, and by the time the course began in late August, it was full. Students who earned a 90 or below on their combined Accuplacer Reading Comprehension and Sentence Skills tests and had taken our challenge essay were advised to register for this class. Each of

### "Ideas about Human Possibilities"

these students met with a counselor or advisor to confirm that this was an appropriate placement.

English 9000 was a fascinating course to teach. There were certainly many surprises, and the three of us who taught this class—myself plus two embedded tutors—greatly enjoyed the time we spent with the remarkable group of students in this class. It was a very powerful professional experience for me, bringing a deeply moving human dimension to all sorts of abstract academic questions about opportunity, access, and the ideal of open admissions institutions—even for someone like me, who has taught for many years at an open admissions institution and has taught a wide variety of developmental education classes during this time. The students were certainly very underprepared for college-level work, but they were also very capable of learning—and many did learn enough to move on to one of our two developmental course offerings (which are two versions of the same course: English 93, a traditional 3-credit basic reading and writing class; and English 96, a six-credit version of English 93, that offers students three additional hours of class time and significant embedded support). As readers may know, we have all kinds of research now—from neuroscience (Kandel, Schwartz, Jessell, Siegelbaum, and Hudspeth; Doidge; Healy), from studies of IQ and intelligence (Nisbett, Aronson, Blair, Dickens, Flynn, Halpern, and Turkheimer), from psychologists studying the power of social-psychological interventions (Yeager and Walton), from research on how people learn (Bransford, Pellegrino, and Donovan), and from Carol Dweck on “mindsets”—that has shown that intellectual and academic ability is not “fixed.” On the contrary, it can be developed under the right conditions. We also know that it is not easy to “untangle the complicated teleology of success or failure in higher education” (Massey, Charles, Lundy, and Fischer 197). Students who test poorly on placement tests and enroll at community colleges typically bring with them rich and often “non-traditional” life histories that have helped shape both what they have learned and how they approach the academic enterprise. Much of this has been determined by class, economic inequality, and family resources. This does not mean, however, that students who score weakly on college placement tests can’t learn or that their cause is hopeless. Under the right conditions, all students can learn and make progress. The key concern for developmental educators, of course, is establishing the right conditions, which must take into account a host of variables—both in and outside of educational settings—that are often actively at work in the lives of very underprepared students.

Curriculum design for developmental courses is a crucial variable here (Hassel and Giordano “Blurry”; Hassel and Giordano “First-Year”; Hassel, Klausman, Giordano, O’Rourke, Roberts, Sullivan, and Toth). It is one of the key factors that can help establish the right conditions for students in developmental education classes. There is an emerging consensus in our profession that developmental students need a rich curriculum, full of interesting ideas, engaging readings, and some of the real work of college (Rose, *Back* 115-42; Hern “Unleashing”; Hern “Window”). Both Adams’s Accelerated Learning Program and Katie Hern’s accelerated curriculum in California—two curricular models that have become central to developmental education reform in recent years—are built around this principle. As Hern notes, too many basic reading and writing classes are “radically disconnected from the core purposes and habits of mind of a college education” (“Unleashing”). Perhaps most importantly, there is “no world of ideas in that classroom,” no sense of reading as “a way to join a larger discussion of issues that matter. No opportunity for students to climb into the upper reaches of Bloom’s taxonomy, weigh conflicting evidence, and develop their own well-informed viewpoints.” The tasks students are given in many cases bear “little relation to the kinds of reading, thinking, and writing they would see in a good college-level course.” Students encountering a reductive skill-and-drill curriculum three levels below college-level courses are, indeed, very likely *not* to persist and graduate. Their poor persistence and graduation rates should not surprise us. But it’s not the students who are failing—to a significant degree, it’s our curriculum. In his important essay, “Remediation at a Crossroads,” Mike Rose urges teachers of basic writing to make the most of this historic moment in our long engagement with developmental education to dramatically rethink our approach and pedagogy:

The big question is whether we will truly seize this moment and create for underprepared students a rich education in literacy and numeracy, or make some partial changes—more online instruction, shortened course sequences—but leave the remedial model intact.

Here and elsewhere (*Back; Possible; Lives; Why*), Rose works from a progressive democratic and economic model that will be important for us to consider as we think about community colleges and developmental education courses like this.

As we develop the next generation of developmental curriculum, we can build on the findings of neuroscience—and the link we can make

between Rose's understanding of the urgency of this moment and Carol Dweck's research on "mindsets." As readers may know, Dweck's research draws on "the revolutionary discovery that the human brain can change itself" (Doidge xvii). Much like a muscle, we now know that the brain can grow—developing new neural pathways and strengthening existing ones (Bransford, Pellegrino, and Donovan; Kandel, Schwartz, Jessell, Siegelbaum, and Hudspeth). Neural pathways can also decay and atrophy with disuse. These processes occur throughout our lifespan depending on what we ask our brains to do. Dweck has found that even what students *believe* about intelligence and the human brain helps determine how and what they learn ("Brainology"; Dweck *Mindsets*; Blackwell, Trzesniewski, and Dweck). I began my English 9000 class with Dweck's "Brainology" essay and an additional article about neuroscience and brain plasticity in an attempt to challenge and displace what my students were likely to have believed about themselves and their potential. To borrow a phrase from Dweck, I was endeavoring to create "a different psychological world" for my students, who I believed had probably known mostly failure and frustration in English classes ("Brainology" 1). In general, taken cumulatively, this research by Dweck and others—in neuroscience, psychology, and intelligence—suggests that open admissions institutions shouldn't be turning students away simply because they have very low placement test scores. Instead, following Dweck and others, we should be theorizing our work as focused on "potential that can be realized through learning" ("Brainology" 1). Sharing this research with my students liberated them from restrictive and outdated understandings of cognitive development, and gave them reason to hope and work hard. The latest science and research outside of our discipline suggest that "potential" is what open admissions policies and developmental education should continue to be most fundamentally about.

## **JOURNEYS**

So who were these students in English 9000? Where did they come from? And what might we learn from them about developmental education and community colleges? Since this class was among the first transitional strategies classes offered in the state under PA 12-40, there may be some value in pausing for a moment to examine this historic cohort of students. This group of students provides professionals interested in questions related to access and higher education a unique opportunity to reflect on key questions for our profession and our nation, framed and embodied by very real people

with unique life histories. Had the open door at Connecticut community colleges been closed, these students would have been turned away. Let's meet some of them at this historic moment in the history of Connecticut higher education—our first cohort of theoretically "undeserving" students.

Inspired by Betsy Bowen and Kathryn Nantz's work with GED students at an adult literacy center in Bridgeport, Connecticut, I designed and completed an ethnographic study with this cohort of adult education students, conducting semi-structured interviews with most of the students in this class.<sup>1</sup> My goal was to get a fuller understanding of the lives behind the statistics of our most underprepared developmental students. As it turns out, however, the most compelling data I gathered came not from my interviews, but from an essay assignment students completed as part of their coursework for English 9000, which invited them to talk about their family history and document their journey to MCC. I had hoped this assignment would allow students to tell a little bit of their family history and also help to position them in positive ways at the college. This assignment was also designed to give students the opportunity to write an essay using multiple paragraphs and get some practice quoting from assigned readings and discussing quotations from this work. The readings for this unit included two chapters from Ken Robinson's book about finding one's passion, *The Element*, and the illustrated children's book *Journey* by Aaron Becker. I wanted to give students in this class something beautiful to look at, and Becker's book also provided a powerful way to frame our "journey" theme for this unit. Students also read a story written by an MCC student, Sabina, about her journey from Russia to America and MCC, which was developed as part of another project I am working on, *The Community College Success Stories Project* (<http://www.communitycollegesuccessstories.org>).

The weekend I spent reading these essays was one of the most astonishing I have ever spent reading student written work. On a number of occasions, my jaw literally dropped open as I was reading them. Readers should know that we spent two weeks drafting these essays in class, and I spent a good deal of time during these weeks encouraging students to add additional depth and detail to their journey stories. The writing here represents finished, polished work. Of course, these samples don't show what my students can do responding to assigned readings, which we know is crucial for college-level writers (Sullivan "What"). Many of the students in this class were, indeed, eventually able to produce promising work in response to readings because they had become serious about improving their academic skills; they had committed to rereading, revision, and multiple drafts; and they

#### "Ideas about Human Possibilities"

had embraced, following Carol Dweck, the idea that effort is an important part of success and produces learning and growth, especially if the challenge is significant, as it was here.

I invite readers to observe the rich diversity of lived human experience embodied in the excerpts from these essays below, and to consider what these stories may have to tell us about the value of open admissions institutions. We may also wish to consider what these excerpts might have to say about us—America, as a nation and a democracy. We have sought to democratize our system of higher education by creating open admissions institutions. We have provided opportunities to attend college to adult students regardless of their past history or academic record. These stories—this data set—communicate important information to us about who our students are and why they might be here—information that is very different than that communicated by raw numbers like placement test scores or program completion rates (Sullivan “Measuring”; Sullivan and Nielsen). These excerpts tell a very different, much more complex story about “democracy’s college”—one that is deeply embedded in global political movements, national and international history, economic realities for the poor and working class, and gender issues, along with more personal histories, aspirations, and ambitions (Bailey and Dynarski; Bourdieu and Passeron; Pickett; Reardon).

By attending carefully to stories like this—and data sets other than statistics—we help enact Stephanie L. Kershbaum’s recommendations about engaging diversity and difference. We can therefore be “*learning with*” our students rather than “*learning about*” them—“and thus always coming-to-know students. As its name implies, coming-to-know is a never-ending process, not a fixed destination; teachers never arrive at a place where they *know a student*” (57). Kershbaum suggests we have much to gain from this kind of orientation:

Recognizing the contingency of identity and remaining vigilant toward our own orientations to difference is important for us as teachers because our vantage points lead us to see our students in particular ways—some of which can be harmful and damaging. (9)

Kershbaum’s work related to how we choose to orient ourselves toward difference is supported by recent work on transitioning to higher education by Trevor Gale and Stephen Parker. Gale and Parker identify three distinct ways that a student’s transition to higher education is typically theorized in research literature: 1. transition as induction, defined as providing a

“fixed turning point” (739); 2. transition as development, defined as focusing primarily on identity development; and 3. transition “as becoming,” which essentially “rejects transition as a useful concept” (734) because “the concept of transition itself does not fully capture the fluidity of our learning or our lives” (743). Gale and Parker champion this third understanding of transition, which is newly emerging in the research literature, because it has the potential to generate “new thinking about transitions in HE [higher education] in socially inclusive ways” (735) and because it “emphasizes the complexities of life and the interdependence of ‘public issues’ and ‘private troubles’” (744). This is a theory of transition that could be of great value for individuals seeking to understand open admissions institutions and the students who attend them.

Here are some of the most powerful and moving moments from my students’ “Journey” essays:

### **Shernette**

My name is Shernette Thompson. I was born in Jamaica in a small parish that is called St Mary. I am the baby of the five children. I attended school at age four until age fifteen. I did not get to attend high school because my mother could not afford to pay the fee. She needed us to help to take care of the farm. We had to go to the river to get water to water the vegetables. She planted cabbage, carrots, beans, and corn to bring to the market to sell to provide food for the family. On the land we had cows, chickens, and goats. In the morning we had to get up early to milk the cows before the calves got to their mother. After we get back we would had bring the goats out in the field before the sun get too hot and the grass get shriveled.

### **Nick**

My family is from Van Buren Maine, which is a small town in the northern part of the state. One of the major ways of life is potato farming. My grandfather (PaPere), owned and managed one of these farms for many years. He sold the farm when potato prices fell and my great grandfather was very old and he could not assist with the farm because he had cataracts and became blind.

The family moved into the main part of town and PaPere got a job at the Air Force Base. He would plow the runways for the airplanes in the winter time and in the summer time, he was a painting contractor. Eventually he worked

## "Ideas about Human Possibilities"

year round at the Air Force Base. My other PaPere was a masonry worker. My other Mamere cleaned houses. My grandparents did not have a lot of money. PaPere Boutot grew vegetables and hunted so his family would have food. My Mom and Dad grew up in Van Buren Maine. After High School my Dad joined the military. My Dad was stationed in Germany on a radio relay station; he would relay messages from one site to another. . . . I went to school in Coventry Connecticut. I was able to see in grammar school. I knew how to read and write print. I lost my eye sight in middle school. I had a hard time dealing with it at first I am ok now. I am able to see when it is dark and light outside. I can see when there are lights on in a room. My retina cells died off that is why I became blind.

### **Octavia**

My family is from North Carolina and Puerto Rico. My grandmother from North Carolina. My grandmother's name is Jacqueline Holmes. She was born in the south in 1952. She had work in the fields at an early age of twelve to help the family. She would get up every morning to go to the field to do whatever crop was ready at the time before she went to School. Then after school she had to clean, do homework cook, and help take care of her siblings. If her parents couldn't go back to the fields to work before it got dark, she would have to go. It was very hard growing up in the south, but her mother always taught that the "the family that prays together stays together." That is true in all walks of life. Besides working in the fields, there was little work for her father to do to make ends meet. He left the family behind and come up north to get a better job. Her mother and other kids where hard during this time. She of praying some nights her mother would go to bed hungry, So that the kids could eat. Finally her father got a job and saved enough money to send for the rest of the family. My grandmother drove the rest of the family to Connecticut, the day after she graduated from school. They were a happy family together once again. My grandmother always said, "There is nothing a person cannot do if they believe in themselves and mostly remember to pray."

### **Prama**

My name is Prama Ro. I was born in a refugee Camp in Thailand in 1996. My parents were born in Burma, which is a country between Thailand and India and below China. In Burma, there are many cultures. My parents were from the Karen group. My family moved to Mae La refugee camp in Thailand because the Burmese soldiers burned down their village and were violent

### Patrick Sullivan

toward the Karen people and they have to running from the Burmese soldiers. At that time, Burmese soldiers didn't care about people. They treated us the Karen like animals. They only wanted to be wealthy and they wanted to keep the power for them. They did not respect the Karen people. They used violence against the people. It took my family about a month to run from the Burmese soldiers. During that month, they had to live in the forest, find their own food and place to sleep.

My family got into the camp in 1984. They had a hard time living in the camp. My family lived there about 25 years. My siblings and I were born in the camp. I grew up in the camp. Life there was hard because we didn't have everything that we wanted. We had little education. To be able to go to school, we had to pay. My parents were lucky because they had jobs when many did not. The house that we lived in was made with bamboo and the roof was covered with leaves. At night, we used candles to read and study. The food, just rice, fish paste, oil, salt and Chile, was rationed every 15 days. Every day we ate the same thing. We carried water to our home in a bucket every afternoon.

We went to school in camp, but we didn't have everything that we needed so the education was poor. The school was also made of bamboo and leaves. We didn't have any power in school and we didn't have computers.

### Javan

My journey started in a local town called Manchester it's in Connecticut. It's a small town nice very quiet and relaxing in life. I wanted things that I couldn't have and I would have to work hard for them. Growing up it was a struggle I was raised by my mom and it was only me and my little sister. My father wasn't there for us all the time but he would come around and help out with things. At a young age I would learned different responsibilities and becoming the man of the house. I couldn't believe that I would be in charge of everything like cleaning the house, help my mom out the best way that I can. Everything was a struggle not having your father around and being able to learn from your mother how to become a young man. Theirs things that your mothers can't always teach but sometimes you have to learn on your own. My mom is a brave woman who was always there for me when things wasn't always good.

### **Francisco**

It begins when I was born in Hartford, CT, September 24, 1995. My parents came to Hartford [from Puerto Rico] to have a better life for me. Their life was crazy before then. They had to help their family in the farm and go to school. One day my grandpa, the father of my dad, was selling pigs next to a store when someone called my father saying that his father got shot. My dad got in the car and rushed to bring his father to the hospital. I don't know the whole story but from that day forward his childhood was hell. He had to quit helping his father out around the house because now grandfather was in a wheel chair. My father was like the man of the house at fourteen years old. He was the 3rd oldest of seven children. The rest of them were young so my father had to do all the heavy lifting. He had to wake up at 4 in the morning to feed the pigs, chickens, and then run to the town to buy some bread, rice and fruit for the family. And then at eighteen, my dad met my mom and they left Puerto Rico to come to Hartford for a better job.

### **Yadira**

This my story, between dealing with my parents splitting up, my brother joining the marine during the new start of war of Afghanistan and Iraq plus my personal school and relationship experience. This is truly a roller coaster of events. Beginning when my mother and father met in Panama City where my father was stationed in the military. My parents were married in 1985 a few months before my brother Junior (family nickname) was born. Then, shortly after, my parents moved to Texas where my dad was stationed for six months. They then moved to Connecticut to raise their family and shortly after that I was born. My parents were an average family living in Hartford. Hartford then wasn't as violent as it is now. Once my parents received great paying jobs, my parents decided to buy a house in East Hartford. . . .

During all this craziness, my big brother junior had joined the marines. It was the hardest thing for me and my mother to adjust to the idea of my brother possibly not coming home. This happened during the twin towers when America had announce we have been hit by terrorist and that America will be at war with Afghanistan and Iraq. The thought of my brother not coming home was the worst not only for the simple fact he was my only brother or sibling. During this time my mother and I would wait impatiently for my brother's phone calls and watching the news about the war; in which that was unbearable for the both of us.

• • • •

Another student, who was born and raised in New York and moved to three different parts of the city—Fort Greene, East New York, and Brownsville—lived in a shelter with his family for a number of years, and lost a close family member to street violence (a stabbing behind a local corner store near his house). Another student in this class was born in China, met her American husband there, and moved to the U.S. after getting married. Everyone in her family including her mother, father, brother, and grandmother still lives in China. In her journey essay, she acknowledged that leaving her family and friends and moving to a new country continued to be difficult: “A lot of times when I sleep I dream of all the happy times of when I was in China. When I wake up I realize that it wasn’t real and it was a dream.”

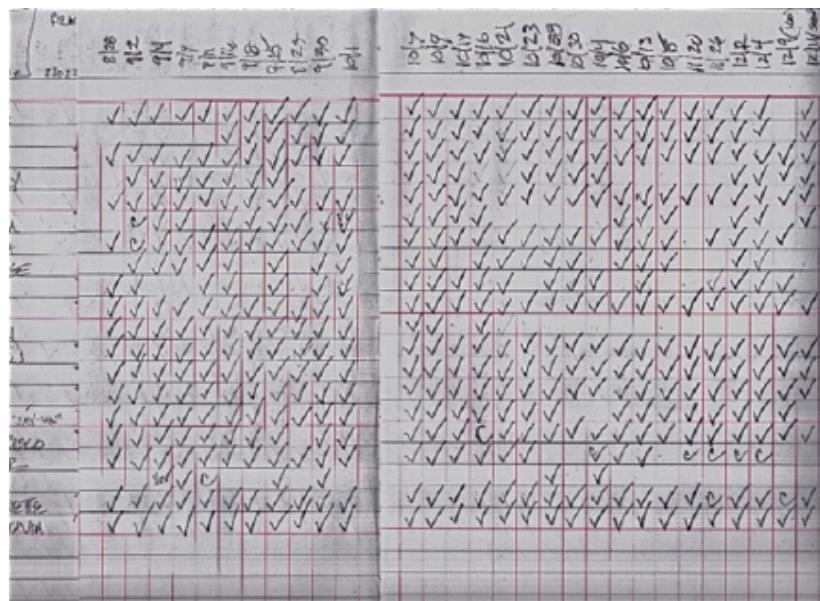
## **KEY FINDINGS**

## A. Working Hard in Class

Did my students honor the time and resources that were provided to them in this course, which was offered free of charge? Very much so. Figures 7 and 8, from my gradebook pages for this class, suggest that most of the students in English 9000 appear to have been working in good faith to pass this class. This data set suggests that as a group these students valued this opportunity to attend college.

**Figure 7:** My gradebook pages for English 9000, fall 2014

## "Ideas about Human Possibilities"



**Figure 8:** The attendance record for my English 9000 class, fall 2014

I see little evidence here of tax revenue being wasted. Instead I see students doing their very best to lift themselves up the academic and economic ladder by their own bootstraps—through hard work, effort, and personal responsibility. This is what Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill call “creating an opportunity society” (1-18; 189-90) by implementing social policies that “reward personal responsibility and enhance mobility” (1). Haskins and Sawhill suggest that “policies aligned with the value of helping people help themselves are likely to be politically acceptable as well as effective” (2). This is precisely what community colleges and developmental education programs are designed to do.

## **B. Working Outside of Class**

Most of the students in this class had jobs. As we know, this is often the case with students who attend community colleges. What may come as something of a surprise is just how engaged so many of these students were with their jobs and how important the pressure to generate income was for them. This is not something that comes immediately to mind, of course, when we think of a typical college student, and this is part of the narrative about attending college in America that needs to be challenged and updated.

In fact, during the course of the semester, a number of students found it impossible to hold down their jobs and also make it to class and complete their work for school. To give readers a sense of the scope of my students' engagement with work and the kinds of jobs they had while they were in my class, here is a sampling of the data gathered from my interviews related to their working lives:

- Insurance corporation mailroom / 30 hours a week
- Retail clothing outlet / 22-28 hours a week
- Valet parking / 40 hours a week
- Fast food restaurant / 25-30 hours a week
- Staff assistant at a church / 15-25 hours a week
- Driver for a local delivery service / 10 hours a week
- Cashier at a farmer's market / 21 hours a week
- Certified nurse's aide / 32 hours a week
- Retail handler at Goodwill / 20 hours a week
- Fast food sandwich shop / 30 hours a week

Work was at the center of most of these students' lives. College was something they did *in addition to* devoting a great deal of time and energy each week to work.

### C. Managing Scarcity

On a related note, it also became clear during the course of the semester that many of these students were constantly living on the edge of real financial crisis. As we know, seemingly "minor" events like an illness, reduced hours at work, problems with a vehicle, or other unanticipated events can have catastrophic long-term effects on the ability of less financially advantaged individuals to stay in college and pursue a degree and work toward earning an academic credential—a key variable that many discussions about measuring success at community colleges ignore or undervalue. I received a number of emails from students in English 9000 during the semester that brought this point home very powerfully. I share one of them here (with the author's permission), to help illustrate the kind of worlds many of these students live in—worlds that are perhaps more precarious than we might imagine:

From: Brendan

Sent: Monday, November 03, 2014 3:16 PM

"Ideas about Human Possibilities"

Hey I am sorry I haven't been going to class I been depress and really been tie up with stuff going on in the family right now my situation is that I have no job at all to pay my bills and also helping out my mom out as well so I had to find a job to pay my bills I have no money what so ever I want to finish class but I can't cuz I found a job Monday to Friday 8 am to 4 pm I don't what to do cuz I really don't have a choices about it if next year comes around I wouldn't be able to apply for classes cuz I didn't had the money for it at all I don't if there any way to work it out with you

This email, composed following the genre conventions of the text message, certainly suggests that this student is much closer to financial and personal hardship than we might normally expect the typical college student to be. I received another email from a female student in this class that was one of the most heartbreaking pieces of correspondence I have ever received from a student. She was the mother of two young children and she was writing to tell me that she had been arrested on charges related to a domestic dispute. It took her longer than expected to post bail, so she had to spend a night in jail. She told me that she was determined to continue with the class but was hesitant to come to campus that week because she had some bruising that hadn't cleared up yet and she felt that would be embarrassing. She asked if arrangements might be made to submit her work another way.

Both of these individuals were among the most dedicated and hard-working students in the class. Both passed English 9000, and both went on to register for classes the following semester. Both of these students have the drive and the ability to be successful college students. It is important to note, however, that going to college for most of the students in this class is a profoundly different experience than the traditional model that students have followed in the past—spending four consecutive years right after high school at college, living on campus, and focusing full-time on earning a degree. Much of this difference is due, of course, to economic inequality and vastly different financial situations. Most of these students simply did not have the financial resources to spend four years at college earning a degree. It seems almost cruel to measure the success of these very different cohorts of students with the same simple graduation rates. Because of these challenges, earning a credential or degree will require extraordinary focus, perseverance, and determination, and also, of course, some degree of luck. Learning about my students' personal situations helped me understand exactly how difficult this journey would be.

Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir's work on "scarcity" can help us understand some of the psychological dynamics at play here. Mullainathan and Shafir have found that "scarcity captures the mind" (5-10) in powerfully dangerous ways: "Scarcity is more than just the displeasure of having very little. It changes how we think. It imposes itself on our minds" (7). Scarcity reduces cognitive capacity, willpower, and patience, creating a shortage of mental "bandwidth" (17) that complicates any task that requires focus, attention, and mental stamina, like completing a developmental reading and writing course. Scarcity impacts both fluid intelligence ("the ability to think and reason abstractly and solve problems independent of any specific learning or experience" [47]) and executive control (or self-control), and it has reduced functional IQ in clinical tests (52).

We must be very careful employing research like this to make generalizations about cohorts of students, of course, and I can only report what I found in my class. But it certainly appeared that scarcity was a significant factor in the lives of many of my students in English 9000. This scarcity impacted not only their ability to concentrate in class and complete homework outside of class, but also their ability to pursue a long-term course of study and complete a degree or certificate. Most of the students in this class were living much more tenuously than traditional college students, who are able to attend a residential college for four years. One English 9000 student, for example, came to class directly from his third shift job and simply could not stay awake in class. He needed to work full-time in order to help his family pay bills (his mother was seriously ill and unable to work). Our program also provided free bus passes for students, and when I announced this to the class, I was quickly able to give away all five of the passes I had available. I had assumed that only one or two students would need them. Taking the bus often added an additional hour each way to my students' days as they traveled to and from campus and to and from work. When the weather permitted, one student rode his bike from Hartford to Manchester to save money, a seven-mile ride each way.

Also, once students moved beyond this free English 9000 course, attending college got a lot more difficult and complicated for many of them. Scarcity played a decisive role here as well. Some deal-breakers involved what less financially strapped families might consider relatively minor amounts of money. One student was frozen out from registering for the spring semester until he paid his outstanding balance from the fall: \$502. He had to make a payment plan over the course of a number of months to pay it off. Another student, who did not qualify for financial aid, could not afford the \$982 she

would have to pay out of pocket for her next English class, our six-credit intensive readiness course, English 96. With tuition costs at open admissions institutions rising, this largely invisible problem related to access and equity is likely to become more pronounced.

#### **D. Struggling with Reading**

In the classroom, the biggest challenge my students faced was reading, and much of this had to do with the lack of vocabulary acquisition and cognitive development that comes with reading that Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley discovered in their landmark study. My students' struggles with reading, in fact, seemed to emphatically confirm Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron's key insight about language acquisition and cultural capital:

language is not simply an instrument of communication: it also provides, together with a richer or poorer vocabulary, a more or less complex system of categories, so that the capacity to decipher and manipulate complex structures, whether logical or aesthetic, depends partly on the complexity of the language transmitted by the family. (73; Bourdieu)

Most of my native speakers had reading scores so low, in fact, that Accuplacer—programmed to branch at a certain threshold for ELL students—began testing them as if they were still in the process of learning English. Here are two samples for two of my native speakers:

- Accuplacer Reading Comp. 038.0  
LOEP Reading Skills 090.0
- Accuplacer Reading Comp. 027.0  
LOEP Reading Skills 037.0

**Note:** LOEP (Levels of English Proficiency) is the ESL Reading Skills test.

If a student's raw score is below 40 in Reading Comprehension, the computer-adaptive software branches them into the LOEP test.

As a group, the students in this class found almost everything they were required to read challenging, and most needed considerable discussion and careful supported work with each text we read before understanding it. Reading comprehension was a major challenge all semester long.

One aspect of this problem was that many students in this class were remarkably unversant with a wide and diverse variety of cultural refer-

ences. A chapter from Mindy Kaling's book, *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me?*, proved to be particularly vexing for them. The typical Kaling essay ranges freely across a variety of well-known cultural and pop-cultural reference points, and much of her humor and content is built around these references. Most college-level readers are going to be able to decode this material easily, employing acquired cultural literacy as part of their comprehension strategy. Most of my students were unable to do this—some because they were non-native speakers and did not understand the cultural references; others because they were native speakers who nonetheless were still confused by many of the cultural references that Kaling assumes her audience will understand. Decoding by using contextual cues only got my students so far.

A bigger problem was vocabulary. Contextual clues can be helpful to a degree, but vocabulary is a vitally important variable for reading comprehension. As Catherine Snow and Connie Juel note, “We now have reams of studies that show that good and poor readers differ not in the use of context to make better predictions, but in the swift and efficient identification of words” (507; Nation; Perfetti, Landi, and Oakhill). This certainly proved to be the case in this class. My students were often stopped cold because they didn’t know a single word (“catastrophe,” “conventional,” “assumption”). Sometimes this word was crucial to a passage we were reading. Other times it was incidental. But the effect was usually the same. One memorable, high-stakes example of this occurred at the end of the semester when students were writing their in-class end-of-the-semester essays (a required element mandated by our program; they took a pre-test at the beginning of the semester and this was their required post-test). Students were given a number of random essay prompts, and two of the best writers in the class were stopped in their tracks by the same prompt because of a word they didn’t understand. The prompt began with this sentence: “Americans are bombarded by advertisements every day.” Neither of them could figure out what “bombarded” meant. So the prompt looked like this to them: “Americans are \_\_\_\_\_ by advertisements every day.” Understanding the verb in that sentence is crucial to understanding the question that followed. When they raised their hands to ask me for help, I couldn’t tell them what the word meant, of course, but I did encourage them to use contextual cues. Significantly, both writers were ultimately unable to make much sense of the question and they each ended up struggling to write a good essay.

Skilled readers and experienced writers would probably be able to write a strong essay in response to this prompt even without knowing that word. They would likely be able to pick up from contextual cues in the rest of that

#### "Ideas about Human Possibilities"

prompt that “bombardment” suggested all sorts of negative things similar to “an intensive and sustained attack by bombs or artillery fire.” Strong readers might also have recognized this as a standard, familiar, and much debated academic subject (many textbooks for writing classes include chapters that discuss the impact of advertising; others often focus on developing skills for decoding advertisements). This is the kind of question that students often get asked in junior and senior high school English classes.

What we may be seeing here, in terms of vocabulary development, is another manifestation of scarcity. My ethnographic research revealed that many of these students grew up poor, and as Hart and Risley note, children from poor families often develop a much more limited vocabulary than children who grow up in professional families, encountering on average 32 million fewer words than children from professional families (198). This means that some students in basic writing classes like this one will have heard 32 million fewer words than other students on campus—with corresponding implications for reading comprehension ability, cultural literacy, and “the capacity to decipher and manipulate complex structures.” Given what we know about the crucial link between vocabulary and reading proficiency, many of my English 9000 students will continue to face challenges with reading as they move into the mainstream college-level curriculum. This will be an important and perhaps largely hidden variable as they seek to complete a degree or credential.

In addition to being very poor readers, many of the students in this class also had a very pronounced aversion to reading. On many days, especially at the beginning of the semester, it felt like what I was experiencing was fallout from what Kelly Gallagher has characterized as “readicide”—“the systematic killing of the love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools” (2; Jolliffe; Smith; we appear to have a similar problem with writing [Sullivan, *New* 121-45]). Readicide is caused, Gallagher suggests, by public policy that values the development of test-takers over the development of life-long readers (5). For Gallagher, there are some key educational practices that have contributed to this national problem:

What do teachers and curriculum directors mean by “value” reading? A look at the practice of most schools suggests that when a school “values” reading, what it really means is that the school intensely focuses on raising state-mandated reading test scores—the kind of reading our students will rarely, if ever, do in adulthood. “Valuing reading” is often a euphemism for preparing students to

pass mandated multiple-choice exams, and in dragging students down this path, schools are largely contributing to the development of readicide. (7)

Two recent reports about reading from the National Endowment for the Arts—*Reading at Risk* and *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*—provide disturbing evidence for this claim (see also American). A few bold students were determinedly and almost gleefully demonstrative about this aversion, too, obviously giving voice to years of frustration, disappointment, and hardship (“I hate reading”; “I never read”; “I hate books”). Many claimed never to have completed reading a full book. We must do a better job of making reading an appealing, enjoyable activity for all students, especially in grades 6-12. It is vitally important that we promote reading for pleasure in our classrooms. Michael W. Smith and Jeffery D. Wilhelm have made this case in two essential books about reading, *Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys* and *Reading Unbound*, both of which highlight the importance of student motivation and engagement with reading. Thomas Newkirk also gives eloquent expression to this idea as well: “unless we can persuade students that reading is a form of deep sustained pleasure, they will not choose to read; and because they will not choose to read, they will not develop the skills to make them good readers” (117). Nancie Atwell has championed the importance of reading for pleasure her entire career (*In the Middle; Reading*; see also Miller). Important new longitudinal research by Alice Sullivan and Matt Brown—reported in their essay, “Social Inequalities in Cognitive Scores At Age 16: The Role of Reading”—has shown that reading for pleasure has important benefits across a variety of academic disciplines (including math) and that “reading is actually linked to increased cognitive progress over time” (37; Wolf). This work confirms the key conclusions by Hart and Risley and Bourdieu and Passeron about the link between reading and the development of a complex system of categories and sophisticated intellectual functions.

### **HOPE REQUIRED WHEN GROWING ROSES IN CONCRETE**

How might we best develop a theoretical approach and a curriculum for this cohort of students unready for college-level work? Should we turn them away as “undeserving”? I would like to suggest we adopt a strategy built around Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade’s idea of “critical hope.”

All of my students’ stories about coming to college were about hope in one way or another. This is important to keep in mind because in addition to significantly increased public scrutiny of developmental education,

#### "Ideas about Human Possibilities"

the very idea of open admissions at community colleges—a public policy whose most foundational principle is hope—has recently been called into question again. Recent essays by Ray Flores and Mike Rose in the online news and opinion website, *Inside Higher Ed*, provide a paradigmatic example of this ongoing public debate. Flores suggests in his essay, "False Hope," that remedial education has been, by and large, an expensive failure, especially for our most underprepared students: "In summary, students testing into the lowest levels of developmental education have virtually no chance of ever moving beyond remedial work and achieving their educational goals. For those students and their families, developmental education is expensive and demoralizing." Flores suggests that admitting such students is unwise and misguided, an ill-advised use of tax dollars, and "callous at best" because these students "have virtually no chance of becoming college-ready." Of course, narratives about basic writing like this, to borrow a formulation from historian Tony Holt, make accessible certain ideas about human possibilities and foreclose others (11). Behind this kind of thinking is an economic theory that frames investment in developmental education on a business model that privileges return on investment and statistical probabilities. P.L. Thomas's observations about neoliberalism and public education in the U.S. are important to keep in mind here:

"No Excuses" Reformers insist that the source of success and failure lies in each child and each teacher, requiring only the adequate level of effort to rise out of the circumstances not of her/his making. As well, "No Excuses" Reformers remain committed to addressing poverty solely or primarily through education, viewed as an opportunity offered each child and within which . . . effort will result in success.

Social Context Reformers have concluded that the source of success and failure lies primarily in the social and political forces that govern our lives. By acknowledging social privilege and inequity, Social Context Reformers are calling for education reform *within* a larger plan to reform social inequity—such as access to health care, food security, higher employment along with better wages and job security. (qtd. in Porfilio, Gorlewski, Carr, and Thomas 1)

A number of recent books have challenged neoliberal economic theory as it has been applied to higher education and have, instead, championed a more progressive, humanistic model, focusing on access and opportu-

nity—and the public good—to address growing concerns about inequality, entrenched power and inherited wealth, and building a strong democracy in America (Brown; Harvey; Kezar, Chambers, and Burkhardt). I am suggesting here, following Marc Tucker's recommendations about education in *Surpassing Shanghai: An Agenda for American Education Built on the World's Leading Systems* (2013), a book that examines the world's best ideas about education, that we “design for equity” (213-14).

Hope brought my English 9000 students to our campus, and the dream of a better future is what sustained them through the many challenges they faced during the semester. Instead of sending these students away, we gave them a chance to begin. Most of the students in this class honored that opportunity by working with great diligence and perseverance. As Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade observes in “Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete,” there are many different kinds of hope, including manifestations of what he calls “false hope” (hokey hope, mythical hope, and hope deferred). Counteracting this kind of superficial hope is a kind of complex hope that Duncan-Andrade defines as “critical hope.” I would like to see us theorize our work with basic writers as providing precisely this kind of “critical hope”:

On the flipside of these false hopes lies critical hope, which rejects the despair of hopelessness and the false hopes of “cheap American optimism” (West, 2008, p. 41). Critical hope demands a committed and active struggle “against the evidence in order to change the deadly tides of wealth inequality, group xenophobia, and personal despair” (West, 2004, pp. 296-297). (5)

Duncan-Andrade suggests that this kind of “critical hope” is most essentially about “control of destiny,” an “actively present sense of agency to manage the immediate stressors in one's daily life” (4; Sternnglass). Community colleges might be said to offer precisely this kind of potential for agency and control of destiny.

Teaching this class was an inspiring experience for the two tutors who assisted me as well. One of these individuals, Yanira Hernandez, was an honors student at MCC at the time and was serving as a peer tutor in the class. She worked with me over the course of three semesters (spring 2014 [teaching an early version of English 9000], fall 2014, spring 2015). I was surprised to learn, after being asked by Yanira to complete an Academic Student Assessment form required for a Phi Theta Kappa scholarship application, that

#### "Ideas about Human Possibilities"

working with the students in this class was her “most significant endeavor since attending community college.” With Yanira’s permission, I share her response to that question:

My most significant endeavor at Manchester Community College has been the work I did as a tutor for college readiness English classes. For three semesters I spent a great deal of time as an in-class tutor working with students from a variety of backgrounds and abilities. I was exposed to students from different age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnicities. I also had the great opportunity to work with talented students with developmental and physical challenges. These students displayed a beautiful spirit to overcome challenges I had never seen before. They demonstrated a level of quiet determination for no reward other than their own self-growth.

In this role I was challenged by questions from students and worked with professors to help them learn some key skills to prepare them for college English courses. I also helped students with vital computer skills, time management skills, reading and writing, and helped them gain self-advocacy skills to help them after they complete this course. In this class I coached reluctant students and they gradually gained more confidence throughout the class.

After the first semester I began to realize how important my role as a tutor was. I saw students I worked with becoming involved in school functions. I ran into some of the same students working with the tutors in the Academic Support Center. Walking through campus, students I previously worked with stopped me regularly to tell me how well they were doing. I believe these students, who may not have this opportunity at a four-year institution, are going to make a positive impact in their community. While some of them were learning English as a second language, some of them were veterans and students who graduated high school without the adequate skills to succeed in college. It is critically important for colleges to keep programs like this going to help change the course of life for many that have the determination to improve their lives. When student leaders devote a semester or two to helping their peers,

Patrick Sullivan

they also learn a great deal from the experience. This experience has stretched my view on what success in college really means. This work as a tutor has made a difference in my life. It has made a positive difference in the students' lives, and it will help our school and our community. I believe that when struggling students get the level of support they need, and see what their hard work can do for them, it helps all of us.

### **A GREAT NATION IS A COMPASSIONATE NATION**

Despite having to overcome a variety of serious academic and non-academic challenges, many students in this class significantly improved their reading and writing skills by the end of the semester. Some of this was dispositional. As students began to regard reading and writing as more enjoyable and interesting, they worked harder, focused more strategically, and were less likely to give up and stop. This alone made them better readers and writers. Some of it was also practice and modeling, so that they began to get a better sense of how skilled readers and writers work, what good reading and writing look like, and what kind of effort is needed to produce strong academic work. Some of it was developing a larger and more effective repertoire of reading and writing strategies. To be sure, each of these students had much more work left to do, and we need to acknowledge this fact even as we celebrate their successes.

As we know, and as the students in this class made abundantly clear, standardized placement tests (or, indeed, any kind of placement protocol, no matter how well intentioned or skillfully designed) can't predict or define potential or what students might be capable of learning or achieving. Or what students might be capable of becoming. Placement scores are not destiny. Rather, they provide only a momentary snapshot of a particular skill set, which can always be improved with effort and practice. This becomes especially crucial to keep in mind when such scores are used to determine access to higher education. As Dweck notes, "An assessment at one point in time has little value for understanding someone's ability, let alone their potential to succeed in the future" (*Mindset* 29). Despite these students' limitations and challenges, many did well in this class, earning the right to move forward with their education.

I finished this semester in English 9000 cautiously optimistic about this group of students. Most made substantial progress. Overall, thirteen of our initial twenty students graduated from English 9000, and twelve en-

#### "Ideas about Human Possibilities"

rolled in one of our basic reading and writing classes in the spring of 2015. Of those who didn't pass, one student decided that college was not for him and indicated that he would not be returning. Two students had trouble attending classes regularly—both because of work obligations. Two other students—each with a significant learning disability—also did not pass English 9000. One of these students repeated English 9000 in the spring and passed. Another student came to college with serious behavioral and maturity issues. This student took a college success class in the spring and passed it with a final grade of "B." Another student was advised to enroll in our ESL curriculum track. All the rest (twelve students) moved forward into one of our basic reading and writing courses.

I tracked these students to see how they did in their subsequent English classes in the spring 2015 semester. To my delight, seven of these twelve students (58% of those who took the next English class) passed these courses and within a year had become eligible for FYC and many other college-level courses. If we calculate these numbers using the entire class (twenty students), the percentage is 35%. As I reviewed those who didn't pass this subsequent English class, there were a few surprises (students who I expected to do well but didn't) and some that were less surprising (students who moved on but would have had to work very hard to pass).

As a group, the students in this English 9000 were mostly young, hard-working, and full of positive energy and optimism about their futures. Part of their optimism came from us—and the fact that our open admissions institution believed in them enough to offer this class and give them a chance to attend college. It would have been a shame to have turned any of them away. Certainly, some of them found out that college, for whatever reason, was not for them, at least at the moment. Many others, though, found themselves fully engaged and were inspired to move forward with their college career. I see most of the students in this class limited only by the things that limit us all, many of which are beyond our control—how supportive our families are, how much discretionary income we can devote to paying for our college education, how many hours a week we have to work, how much time we can devote to our schoolwork, what kinds of family responsibilities and situations we have, what kinds of support networks we can draw on, what kinds of neighborhood schools we attended, how safe our neighborhoods are, and so on. Given how complex these students' lives are—and how different their situations are from the traditional ideal of attending college at a residential campus and devoting four years full-time to earning a degree—we know for

## Patrick Sullivan

sure, unfortunately, that many challenges await that will complicate and imperil their pursuit of a degree or credential.

As I have kept in touch with my students from this class over the last year and half, I have seen again and again how precarious many of their situations are and how difficult pursing a degree is for many of them. Most of this difficulty is driven by limited family resources and economic hardship (Cahalan and Perna; Tough; Wilson). Some of these students have continued on at MCC; others have been delayed or frustrated by various challenges, which have mostly been economic. The key principle we must take away from this study is a profound one, related to equity, agency, and social justice: There is simply no way to predict the course of a human life, and educators and state legislatures should not be in this kind of prediction business. We must not let test scores or state legislators decide who gets the chance to attend college. Open admissions policies let individual students decide for themselves, and they are then free to make of this opportunity what they can. In order for this revolutionary policy to remain viable, we are likely going to be called upon to defend it. We must be ready and willing to do so.

As Martin Luther King observed in his Nobel Prize Address:

Ultimately a great nation is a compassionate nation. No individual or nation can be great if it does not have a concern for “the least of these.” Deeply etched in the fiber of our religious tradition is the conviction that men are made in the image of God and that they are souls of infinite metaphysical value, the heirs of a legacy of dignity and worth. If we feel this as a profound moral fact, we cannot be content to see men hungry, to see men victimized with starvation and ill health when we have the means to help them.

There are many ways one can be hungry. If we accept King's premise about compassion, there are few things we do as a society that are more compassionate than offering our citizens (even those who some might consider “the least of these”) the opportunity to build better futures for themselves and their families.

## **ACTIVISM**

Unfortunately, an ominous and powerful new presence in basic writing has emerged in recent years—the activist, interventionist state legislature. We have clearly entered a new era where state legislatures feel emboldened to bypass disciplinary expertise and even common sense in order to man-

#### "Ideas about Human Possibilities"

date public policy for developmental curriculum. This is a deeply troubling new development that we must actively resist (Sullivan "Two-Year"; Adler-Kassner). It is impossible not to feel emanating from this kind of legislation impatience and perhaps also a little anger at the slow pace some students take toward proficiency. Such an approach typically dismisses or discounts all the variables we have documented here that make completing coursework and earning a degree difficult for some students. Where PA 12-40 is informed by best practices and current innovations in our field, the committee that framed this legislation made good choices (mandating multiple measures for placement and embracing an accelerated co-requisite model). But the committee appears to have perhaps misread or misunderstood the Baltimore acceleration model. Peter Adams and his colleagues do not suggest that every student can be successful in an accelerated program—only that some can, particularly those close to current cut scores who have been underplaced (Scott-Clayton and Stacey).

There is also a significant element of what we might call wishful—or even magical—thinking embedded in PA 12-40. This is driven, I'm afraid, by a lack of experience with basic writers and developmental education. Basic writers in the state of Connecticut are now limited by law to taking only one developmental class. The state legislature has summarily decided that one course is all any student could ever need, and it has decreed, in effect, "by God, that is all they will get." There is a neoliberal economic model at work here suggesting that developmental education itself is the problem, rather than a host of economic, social, and cultural variables that can slow down or stop progress toward completion of a degree for some students. I am hopeful the research I report in this essay will help challenge this kind of thinking. As Katherine Mangan notes, "The way policy makers in some states see it, the biggest obstacles preventing students from completing college are the courses that are supposed to help unprepared students catch up" (Boylan and Goudas; Fain; Goudas and Boylan).

Developmental education reform and legislation like PA 12-40 has focused much-needed attention on students who don't need basic writing classes or who are likely to pass a college-level writing course with additional embedded support. A related trend that is emerging directly from this reform is that when we remove students who shouldn't have been in basic writing classes to begin with, this changes the make-up of developmental classes significantly. As a consequence, success rates for basic writing courses appear to be falling. This is an issue that has emerged at my home institution and has also become a topic of concern for a national committee of scholars, TYCA's

Patrick Sullivan

Research Committee, which recently completed a White Paper related to placement reform. (I am a member of this committee.) This problem may have always been with us, but the struggles of significantly underprepared students appear to have been hidden by the strong performances of underplaced or misplaced students, who made it seem like these classes were working reasonably well.

At a spring English department meeting at my institution this year (2015), as we were reporting out and discussing the first full year of implementation of our new developmental curriculum mandated by PA 12-40, this point emerged as a key topic of concern. Students in our accelerated courses were doing well, and we appear to have significantly reduced the number of underplaced students in our developmental courses. Unfortunately, our workhorse developmental course, which we now offer in a 3-and expanded 6-semester-hour format, appears to have significantly lower completion rates. What had worked previously—perhaps because of strong underplaced or misplaced students—no longer appears to work as well. We also face a quandary. By state law, students are only allowed to take one semester of developmental coursework. Are students allowed to repeat this course? What do students do if they don't pass the one developmental class they are allowed to take? At the moment, we don't know the answer to these questions. The law reads as follows:

Not later than the start of the fall semester of 2014 and for each semester thereafter, no public institution of higher education shall offer any remedial support, including remedial courses, that is not embedded with the corresponding entry level course, as required pursuant to subsection (b) of this section, or offered as part of an intensive college readiness program, except such institution may offer a student a maximum of one semester of remedial support that is not embedded, provided (1) such support is intended to advance such student toward earning a degree, and (2) the program of remedial support is approved by the Board of Regents for Higher Education. (Connecticut 2)

As Holly Hassel, Jeff Klausman and their co-authors note, in this new interventionist era, political concerns often supersede sound educational policy:

. . . some state legislatures bypass faculty input and appear to engage in political rather than research-based decision making. Florida's changed placement procedures in SB 1720 offer a case in point. By

#### "Ideas about Human Possibilities"

signing the bill into law, the Florida governor mandated what might be considered a version of directed self-placement, declaring some students exempt from mandatory placement assessment and giving most students who are assessed as needing developmental instruction multiple remediation options (see "Case Study" above). The law also radically redefines "college ready" by decreeing that a Florida high school diploma for anyone who has been enrolled since the ninth grade earns automatic placement into college-level courses, regardless of other indicators. Finally, Florida is implementing a single placement test with a single cutoff score established by the state board, which ignores differences in student populations in different parts of the state and the varying curricular and institutional programs at different colleges (Florida Senate). (233)

As I listened to and participated in statewide discussions about implementation of PA 12-40 in the tumultuous months following passage of this legislation, I was alarmed by some of the language I heard being used about underprepared students and the seemingly punitive measures being discussed to deal with them. I spoke with one consultant who was assisting the state with implementation during this process, and he had a similar read on the situation. He said that it appeared to him that some of the framers of this legislation, and some of those who were providing leadership in the initial public discussions of this bill, "simply wanted underprepared students to go away."

The students in my English 9000 class came to our campus, took a battery of placement tests, and formally applied for admission to our institution. Almost all of them came to our college seeking direction, answers, or solutions—seeking different and better futures and lives, and sometimes different and better selves. There is no other place in America where adults can go to pursue this kind of personal transformation and reinvention, which almost always engages the heart as well as the mind. Community colleges provide citizens in our communities with the opportunity to rise above one's past choices, behavior, and history—giving practical embodiment to the proud and noble belief that anything might be possible for any given student. The open admissions policy is an idea that powerfully honors individual student dignity and agency. This is easy to accomplish when students are ready for college. It becomes much more challenging, however, when students are not well prepared and want to attend college anyway. Providing this kind of opportunity for our most underprepared adult learners is difficult and

challenging work, but it is where the ideals of open admissions—and our democracy—are tested and made most real and vital.

In some very powerful ways, this is an ongoing aspect of the political resistance work our discipline has engaged in now for many years. Our students depend on our activism and on our unwavering commitment to equity and social justice. There are powerful forces actively at work in America seeking to erode or turn back advances we have made in civil rights, access, and social justice. We must embrace our work as developmental educators with renewed commitment and determination—and a fresh sense of urgency. It is not just literacy that we are championing, but an inclusive vision of America and democracy. Following Franklin Roosevelt, let us understand that “the test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.” In this way, we follow Amartya Sen and his insistence that any understanding of justice “cannot be indifferent to the lives that people can actually live” (18), as the research documented here clearly suggests. Let us engage this important work in classrooms across America with hope—and determination—in our hearts.

### Note

1. This research received IRB review and exemption. About halfway through the semester, when I realized that I would have to document my experience with this extraordinary class, the idea for this project began to take shape. At this time, I told my English 9000 students about the project I had in mind, and I respectfully asked for permission to interview them and use excerpts from their work. Most of the students in the class were eager to participate. I am using their work and their first names with their permission.

### Works Cited

- Adams, Peter, Sarah Gearhart, Robert Miller, and Anne Roberts. “The Accelerated Learning Program: Throwing Open the Gates.” *Journal of Basic Writing* 28.2 (2009): 50-69. Print.
- Adler-Kassner, Linda. *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2008. Print.
- American College Testing Program [ACT]. *The Condition of College and Career Readiness 2015*. 2015. Web. 28 February 2016.

"Ideas about Human Possibilities"

- Attewell, Paul, and David E. Lavin. *Passing the Torch: Does Higher Education for the Disadvantaged Pay Off Across the Generations?* New York: Russell Sage, 2007. Print.
- Atwell, Nancie. *In the Middle*. 2nd ed. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1998. Print.
- . *The Reading Zone*. New York: Scholastic, 2007. Print.
- Bailey, Martha J., and Susan M. Dynarski. "Inequality in Postsecondary Education: Whither Opportunity?" *Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances*. Eds. Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane. NY: Russell Sage. 2011. 117-31. Print.
- Bailey, Thomas, Katherine Hughes, and Shanna Smith Jaggars. "Law Hamstrings College Remedial Programs." *Hartford Courant* 19 May 2012. Web. 14 August 2015.
- Becker, Aaron. *Journey*. Somerville: Candlewick, 2013. Print.
- Blackwell, Lisa, Kali Trzesniewski, and Carol Sorich Dweck. "Implicit Theories of Intelligence Predict Achievement Across an Adolescent Transition: A Longitudinal Study and an Intervention." *Child Development* 78.1 (2007): 246-263. Print.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Forms of Capital." *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. Ed. J. Richardson. New York, Greenwood, 1986. 241-58. Print.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, and Jean-Claude Passeron. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. 2nd ed. Trans. Richard Nice. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2000. Print.
- Bowen, Betsy, and Kathryn Nantz. "What Is the Value of the GED?" *College English* 77.1 (2014): 32-54. Print.
- Boylan, Hunter R., and Alexandros Goudas. "Knee-Jerk Reforms on Remediation." *Inside Higher Ed*. 20 June 2012. Web. 8 May 2015.
- Bransford, John D., James W. Pellegrino, and M. Suzanne Donovan, eds. *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School: Expanded Edition*. Washington: National Academies Press, 2000. Print.
- Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2015. Print.
- Cahalan, Margaret, and Laura Perna. *Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States: 45 Year Trend Report*. 2015 Rev. ed. Washington: Pell Institute, 2015. Print.
- Cho, Sung-Woo, Elizabeth Kopko, Davis Jenkins, and Shanna Smith Jaggars. "New Evidence of Success for Community College Remedial English

- Students: Tracking the Outcomes of Students in the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP)." CCRC Working Paper No. 53. Dec. 2012. Web.
- Connecticut (State). Legislature. Senate and House of Representatives. *Public Act 12-40*. 11 May 2012. Web. 14 Jan. 2016.
- Connecticut State Colleges and Universities. *Developmental Education (PA 12-40)*. N.d. Web. 14 Jan. 2016.
- Crandall, Jennifer R., and Louis Soares. *The Architecture of Innovation: System-Level Course Redesign in Tennessee*. Washington: American Council on Education, 2015. Web. 6 Dec. 2015.
- Dodge, Norman. *The Brain That Changes Itself*. New York: Penguin, 2007. Print.
- Duncan-Andrade, Jeffrey M. "Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete." *Harvard Educational Review* 79.2 (2009): 181-94. Print.
- Dweck, Carol. "Brainology: Transforming Students' Motivation to Learn." *Independent School Magazine*. Winter 2008. Web. 26 Dec. 2015.
- . *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. New York: Ballantine, 2007. Print.
- Fain, Paul. "Overkill on Remediation." *Inside Higher Ed* 19 June 2012. Web. 21 June 2015.
- Flores, Roy. "False Hope" *Inside Higher Ed* 17 Feb. 2011. Web. 10 June 2015.
- Gale, Trevor, and Stephen Parker. "Navigating Change: A Typology of Student Transition in Higher Education." *Studies in Higher Education* 39.5 (2014): 734–53. Print.
- Gallagher, Kelly. *Readicide: How Schools Are Killing Reading and What You Can Do About It*. Portland: Stenhouse, 2009. Print.
- Goudas, Alexandros, and Hunter R. Boylan. "Addressing Flawed Research in Developmental Education." *Journal of Developmental Education* 36.1 (2012): 2-13. Print.
- Haskins, Ron, and Isabel Sawhill. *Creating an Opportunity Society*. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2009. Print.
- Hassel, Holly, and Joanne Baird Giordano. "The Blurry Borders of College Writing: Remediation and the Assessment of Student Readiness." *College English* 78.1 (2015): 56-80. Print.
- . "First-Year Composition Placement at Open-Admission, Two-Year Campuses: Changing Campus Culture, Institutional Practice, and Student Success." *Open Words: Access and English Studies* 5.2 (2011): 29–59. Web.
- Hassel, Holly, Jeff Klausman, Joanne Giordano, Margaret O'Rourke, Leslie Roberts, Patrick Sullivan, and Christie Toth. "White Paper on Devel-

"Ideas about Human Possibilities"

- opmental Education Reforms." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 42.3 (2015) 326–42. Print.
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford, 2005. Print.
- Hart, Betty, and Todd R. Risley. *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes, 1995. Print.
- Hern, Katie. "Acceleration Across California: Shorter Pathways in Developmental English and Math." *Change* May/June 2012: 60-68. Print.
- . "Unleashing Students Capacity through Acceleration: Reflections from an Integrated Reading and Writing Classroom." English Council of Two-Year Colleges in California. 20 Oct. 2011. Web. 15 Sept. 2015.
- . "Window into an Accelerated Classroom." California Acceleration Project. 2011. Web. 15 Sept. 2015.
- Holt, Tony. *Thinking Historically: Narrative, Imagination, and Understanding*. New York: College Board, 1995. Print.
- Kaling, Mindy. *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me?* New York: Crown, 2011. Print.
- Kandel, Eric R., James H. Schwartz, Thomas M. Jessell, Steven A. Siegelbaum, and A. J. Hudspeth. *Principles of Neural Science*. 5th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012. Print.
- Kerschbaum, Stephanie L. *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference*. Urbana: NCTE, 2014. Print.
- Kezar, Adrianna, Tony Chambers, and John Burkhardt. *Higher Education for the Public Good: Emerging Voices from a National Movement*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005. Print.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Nobel Lecture: The Quest for Peace and Justice." Nobelprize.org. 11 Dec. 1964. Web. 28 Feb. 2016.
- Mangan, Katherine. "Remedial Educators Warn of Misconceptions Fueling a Reform Movement." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 28 July 2015. Web. 14 Jan. 2016.
- Massey, Douglas S., Camille Z. Charles, Garvey F. Lundy, and Mary J. Fischer. *The Source of the River: The Social Origins of Freshmen at America's Selective Colleges and Universities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. Print.
- Miller, Donalyn. *The Book Whisperer: Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009. Print.
- Mullainathan, Sendhil, and Eldar Shafir. *Scarcity: The New Science of Having Less and How It Defines Our Lives*. New York: Picador, 2014. Print.
- Mullin, Christopher. "Why Access Matters: The Community College Student Body." AACC Policy Brief. 2012. Web. 8 May 2015.

- Nation, Kate. "Children's Reading Comprehension Difficulties." *The Science of Reading: A Handbook*. Ed. Margaret Snowling and Charles Hulme. Malden: Blackwell, 2005. 248-65. Print.
- National Endowment for the Arts. *Reading at Risk*. Research Division Report 46. Washington: National Endowment for the Arts, 2004. Print.
- . *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*. Research Division Report 47. Washington: National Endowment for the Arts. Nov. 2007. Web. 30 Dec. 2014.
- Newkirk, Thomas. *Holding On to Good Ideas in a Time of Bad Ones*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2012. Print.
- Nisbett, Richard E., Joshua Aronson, Clancy Blair, William Dickens, James Flynn, Diane F. Halpern, and Eric Turkheimer. "Intelligence: New Findings and Theoretical Developments." *American Psychologist* 67.2 (2012): 130-59. Print.
- Perfetti, Charles A., Nicole Landi, and Jane Oakhill. "The Acquisition of Reading Comprehension Skill." *The Science of Reading: A Handbook*. Ed. Margaret Snowling and Charles Hulme. Malden: Blackwell, 2005. 227-47. Print.
- Pickett, Nell Ann. "The Two-Year College as Democracy in Action." *College Composition and Communication* 49.1 (1998): 90-98. Print.
- Porfilio, Brad, Julie Gorlewski, Paul R. Carr, and P.L. Thomas. "Introduction: Social Context Reform—A Pedagogy of Equity and Opportunity." *Social Context Reform—A Pedagogy of Equity and Opportunity*. Ed. P.L. Thomas, Brad Porfilio, Julie Gorlewski, and Paul R. Carr. New York: Routledge, 2014. Print.
- Reardon, Sean F. "The Widening Academic Achievement Gap Between the Rich and the Poor: New Evidence and Possible Explanations." *Whither Opportunity?: Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances*. Eds. Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane. NY: Russell Sage. 2011. 91-115. Print.
- Rose, Mike. *Back to School: Why Everyone Deserves a Second Chance at Education*. New York: New Press, 2012. Print.
- . *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared*. New York: Free Press, 1989. Print.
- . *Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America*. New York: Penguin, 1996. Print.
- . "Remediation at a Crossroads." *Inside Higher Ed* 21 April 2011. Web. 8 May 2011.

"Ideas about Human Possibilities"

- . *Why School? Reclaiming Education for All of Us*. New York: New Press, 2009. Print.
- Roosevelt, Franklin. "Second Inaugural Address." January 20, 1937. *The American Presidency Project: Franklin D. Roosevelt*. Ed. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley. N.d. Web. 7 Dec. 2015.
- Scott-Clayton, Judith, and Georgia West Stacey. "Improving the Accuracy of Remedial Placement." New York: Community College Research Center, 2015. Web. 24 Aug. 2015.
- Sen, Amartya. *The Idea of Justice*. Cambridge: Belknap, 2009. Print.
- Slaughter, Sheila, and Gary Rhoades. *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, States, and Higher Education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004. Print.
- Smith, Cheryl Hogue. "Interrogating Texts: From Diferent to Efferent and Aesthetic Reading Practices." *Journal of Basic Writing* 31.1 (2012): 59-79. Print.
- Smith, Michael W., and Jeffery D. Wilhelm. *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002. Print.
- Smith, Michael W., Jeffery D. Wilhelm, with Sharon Fransen. *Reading Unbound*. New York: Scholastic, 2013. Print.
- Snow, Catherine E., and Connie Juel. "Teaching Children to Read: What Do We Know about How to Do It?" *The Science of Reading: A Handbook*. Eds. Margaret Snowling and Charles Hulme. Malden: Blackwell, 2005. 501-20. Print.
- Snowling, Margaret J., and Charles Hulme. *The Science of Reading: A Handbook*. Malden: Blackwell, 2005. Print.
- Sternglass, Marilyn. *Time to Know Them: A Longitudinal Study of Writing and Learning at the College Level*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997. Print.
- Sullivan, Alice, and Matt Brown, "Social Inequalities in Cognitive Scores at Age 16: The Role of Reading." Center for Longitudinal Studies Working Paper 2013/10. London: Institute of Education, University of London. Sept. 2013. Web. 10 Aug. 2015.
- Sullivan, Patrick. *A New Writing Classroom: Listening, Motivation, and Habits of Mind*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2014. Print.
- . "Measuring 'Success' at Open Admissions Institutions: Thinking Carefully About This Complex Question." *College English* 70.6 (2008): 618-32. Print.
- . "The Two-Year College Teacher-Scholar-Activist." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 42.4 (2015): 227-43. Print.

Patrick Sullivan

- . "What Can We Learn About "College-Level" Writing From Basic Writing Students?: The Importance of Reading." *What Is "College-Level" Writing?* Volume 2: Assignments, Readings, and Student Writing Samples. Ed. Patrick Sullivan, Howard Tinberg, and Sheridan Blau. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2010. 233-53. Print.
- Sullivan, Patrick, and David Nielsen. "'Ability to Benefit': Making Forward-Looking Decisions about Our Most Underprepared Students." *College English* 75.3 (2013): 319-43. Print.
- Tough, Paul. "Who Gets to Graduate?" *The New York Times Magazine* 18 May 2014: 26-30+. Print.
- Tucker, Marc, ed. *Surpassing Shanghai: An Agenda for American Education Built on the World's Leading Systems*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2013. Print.
- Turk, Jonathan M., Christopher J. Nellum, and Louis Soares. *State Policy as a Tool for Postsecondary Developmental Education Reform: A Case Study of Connecticut*. Washington: American Council on Education, 2015. Web. 6 Dec. 2015.
- Wilson, Smokey. "What Happened to Darleen? Reconstructing the Life and Schooling of an Underprepared Learner." *Two-Year College English: Essays for a New Century*. Ed. Mark Reynolds. Urbana: NCTE, 1994. 37-53. Print.
- Wolf, Maryanne. *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*. New York: Harper, 2008. Print.
- Yeager, David S., and Gregory M. Walton. "Social-Psychological Interventions in Education: They're Not Magic." *Review of Educational Research* 81.2 (2011): 267-301. Print.